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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with a peer supervision program developed by the members of the English department of Brattleboro Union High School (Vermont) which has resulted in a sense of collegiality, shared purpose, and a renewed feeling of professionalism among the teachers. The paper describes the ways in which these teachers developed a program to observe each other's teaching, offer advice on curriculum development, and present their own ideas during in-service training, and how they tried to maintain the program in the face of shortages of time and money. The paper states that the program now faces the challenge of the slow withdrawal from active participation of one of its key members. (RS)

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SOME PERSONAL THOUGHTS AND OBSERVATIONS ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF A PEER SUPERVISION PROGRAM WITHIN THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT OF THE BRATTLEBORO UNION HIGH SCHOOL, BRATTLEBORO, VT.

BY

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JUNE 1988

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PART ONE: HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT

In the spring of 1986, at our last department meeting of the year, members of the English department set evaluation and supervision as a theme for the following year's work. We had put off discussing these important functions in the past, and the time had come to grapple with these issues. When the new year began, one of the first issues confronting us was one of definition. We had to separate the processes of evaluation and supervision. After some discussion, we concluded that "evaluation" was judgmental and had as its goal job status decisions. "Supervision," on the other hand, was a nonjudgmental process for instructional improvement. We had difficulty with the term "supervision" because of the nonprofessional overtones it carries. Supervisors in industry are often people who "check up" on employees. This was a real stumbling block, and we began to use the term "assistance" instead. We went through such terms as "formative" and "summative" as well. In time, as we read more, the choice of the word "supervision" was confirmed by Sergiovanni and Glickman.

I no longer remember who, but someone at this point suggested that we observe each other as a component of supervision. This proved to be an interesting idea, and there is much to confirm it in the professional literature. Teachers rarely see each other to share ideas, develop trust and esteem, heighten morale, and reduce threat (Sparks 1983). School improvement demands a reduction in teacher isolation, and high school teachers are the most isolated (Rothberg 1985). Thomas Sergiovanni goes so far as to call teacher talk the lifeblood of professional growth and program development (Sergiovanni, 1971).

We realized at this point that the department head could not be a member of a peer supervision group. In our system, the department head evaluates the teachers in his department. This put a strain on the supervision process as we had defined it. While a peer observer posed no real threat, there was no way to avoid the reality that the department head, even if he said he was there purely as an assistant, was still ultimately responsible for evaluation. Thus, we decided, again after much discussion and perhaps some hurt feelings, that peers were peers, and the department head's peers were other department heads, not staff teachers. All of us had to get used to new roles, and this was uncomfortable. People were scared and reluctant to have others in their classrooms. All this resulted in insecurity and uncertainty. Anxiety ran high at times, and tempers were tested as we worked through these issues. The head had to play a crucial role in the development of this peer supervision program. Someone had to coordinate the work, provide released time, help raise funds, etc. Staff teachers had little power in the bureaucratic structure of the school to do these things. The department head was our link to the administration of the school and our key support. This put him in an awkward position, vital to the program but not a part of it.

We also concluded that peer observations should remain absolutely confidential to further insure that no evaluative component could be introduced into the process. Supervision was to be a pure assistance process. If we were to be open and honest with each other, then we had to eliminate any elements of threat or insecurity. Without openness, honesty, and trust, peer supervision would not be worth much.

The department members then agreed to try observing each other's classes. We had no idea what we were doing, but two days had been set aside when there would be a substitute in the building for English teachers' use. One merely had to sign up for the sub for the period of the day one needed time to

observe another teacher. After everyone had experienced an observation or two, we met again to discuss what had happened. We were discovering the process of peer supervision as we stumbled through it. What was developing was a true grass roots program.

The first meeting after our initial experience with peer observation yielded several important developments. We decided that pre and postconferences were necessary to complement the observation. This three part observation cycle, which we have loosely modeled on Goldhammer's process of clinical supervision, has been so successful that our department head has adopted it for all of his observations. Teachers felt overwhelmed by the number of possibilities in a department of sixteen teachers. The logistics of choosing whom to observe and when was a deterrent to further work. Therefore, we formed groups of three or four, thus putting each teacher in contact with a limited number of peer partners. This made the whole process more manageable and efficient. Each group represented a cross section of the department. My group, The Bluebirds, had four members: a first year teacher of grades nine and ten, a long term veteran of grades eleven and twelve, an experienced teacher of seventh grade, and me, an experienced teacher of grades eleven and twelve. There were two men and two women in the group.

We added two dimensions to the process. First, I published all of our schedules. This allowed us to cover for each other. For instance, I might be able to cover someone's class while he observed someone else. Another member of our group designed a very simple form for writing down what happened during the observation cycle. This consisted of a space for preconference notes, a space for observation notes, and a space for any conclusions from the postconference. This sheet became the property of the observed teacher in order to preserve confidentiality.

As many of us progressed with the project, others began to fall by the

wayside. The question of voluntarism arose. Were we all committed to the project? Should people be required to do this? At this point, I was so enamored of the whole idea that I felt that we should dictate involvement. This was foolish, and any pushing of others to engage in peer observation resulted in a stubborn rejection. I finally came to see that this must be a voluntary program. One cannot force a person to give or take assistance. I was blinded by my own enthusiasm.

As spring approached, the department took advantage of an in-service day to regroup. Because people were floundering or hesitant to move with the peer assistance project, we decided to use this day for demonstration and discussion. The department head was videotaped while teaching an eighth grade class. The regular teacher of that class had a preconference with the head, and this, too, was videotaped. By using the department head, we reduced anxiety and threat. No one would feel put on the spot while we watched the tape. After viewing the preconference, the department members took notes on the class as if we were all observers. This gave everyone practice in this role. After the class, the chair and the eighth grade teacher held the postconference live and unrehearsed. All of us had a chance to put in our respective comments based on our own observation notes. This was an interesting expereince, because a number of people responded with comments such as, "Oh, so that's what you mean." I felt that the process became much more clear to department members that day. We had invited several dignitaries to observe our in-service program, because we were beginning to sense that we needed a power base if we were to continue in the next year. We invited the principals of the junior and senior high schools, the chairperson of the state board of education, the president of VT-NEA, and the local superintendent. The junior high principal, the state board chairperson, and the VT-NEA president did attend our session and were duly impressed with what we were

doing.

By the spring of 1987 the triumphs and problems of our experiment began to clarify themselves. Time was the biggest hindrance. A teaching schedule does not have built into it time for peer support, especially time-consuming cycles of observation. We needed more training in observation techniques and conference techniques. We had to decide once and for all about voluntarism. We needed money.

Before I discuss these problems, I'd like to spend some time with what we had learned up to this point. I had been reading widely in the area of supervision and particularly peer supervision. The English department has sixteen teachers. The department head teaches two classes every day, along with being responsible for evaluation and supervision. Clearly, the assumption is that his role is an inspectorial one, not that of a clinical supervisor. The time is not there. Consequently, we began to see ourselves as supplementing the supervisory process. Acheson and Gall recommend at least six cycles of clinical supervision each year for each teacher if one hopes to affect the instructional process (Acheson and Gall, 1987). We were filling the void.

The department began to develop a sense of collegiality and shared purpose. We realized that we as teachers had the necessary expertise to help each other. There was not always the need to go to some upper echelon for answers. We are competent, trained professionals, and we were beginning to take control of our own professional development. Any supervisory process needs teacher support, and should provide for teacher professionalism and autonomy (Tompson, 1979). Teaching colleagues are often the best or only qualified persons with the insights and experience to help other teachers (NEA, 1986). Peers who are practicing a new skill daily are often better qualified to help each other than a supervisor, who may be more removed from

the immediate situation (Joyce, 1987).

Teachers have gained a sense of empowerment and professionalism from the program. A peer supervision program acknowledges the dignity and human worth of teachers. Teachers' thoughts and ideas become the source of professional dialogue as they are empowered to take control of their own professional development (Smyth, 1986). Teacher burnout has been attributed to the lack of opportunity for teachers to use professional judgment (Wildman and Niles, 1985). Acheson and Gall link using teachers for formative evaluation to personal growth, coherence in program, collegiality, shared teaching ideas, greater understanding of the curriculum, higher morale, better school climate, greater job satisfaction, and higher student achievement (Acheson and Gall, 1987). How can teachers develop self-sufficiency in their students if they themselves have to depend on the opinion of outside experts for confirmation of their own job performance (Armstrong and Ladd, 1975)?

We are developing a new energy in this department. As we see each other teach, a new sense of the continuity or lack of continuity in the program develops. Teachers are seeing their students in new contexts, where they have been and where they are going. We are now seeing teaching as a shared, common experience. There is great relief in seeing colleagues having the same academic or discipline problems as you have. The walls of isolation are coming down. We are developing a base for curriculum revision. The removal of evaluation encourages risk taking, and taking risks is necessary for growth (Goldsberry, 1984). How do you tell your evaluator that you are having classroom control problems? Who would be willing to try a new approach with a high possibilty of failure in front of an evaluator? A peer is a safer observer.

As we grappled with the problem of voluntarism, we realized that the program had to be voluntary, and the way to encourage people to participate

was by example and making participation attractive. For instance, a new teacher might be hesitant to join the group. In that case, I would start by inviting that teacher to observe me. One of the premises of our program is that the newest teacher as well as the most experienced has something to offer and something to learn. The deepened personal and professional relationships forming through the program are another factor encouraging participation. The fact that one can get help which is immediate and available is another. If I need help with a tenth grade discipline problem, I can probably get a tenth grade teacher in my room as an observer within a day or two. This is the kind of help we need. The typical in-service program is brought in from outside. It does not necessarily address the specific problems teachers are having, nor does it usually offer material relevant to everyone who has to attend it. Peer supervision deals with an individual's immediate needs. We engage in professional dialogue and materials exchange much more often than we ever did before.

As the program has developed, we have come to understand the power of teacher ownership. The project was started by English teachers at a grass roots level, and to date no administrator has exerted any control over what we are doing. We own this program, and as such it has come to mean something. We do this because we want to, and we gain a sense of professional autonomy and empowerment from it. In many ways, we are in a state of continuous in-service without needing to pay large sums of money to experts who come into the school, present a lecture for a few hours, and then are heard from no more. What we are doing is vital, immediate, and an integral part of our day-to-day practical teaching lives. At any given time, I would estimate that about one third of the department is taking a course or attending a workshop. We have the current information regarding teaching techniques and research, and peer supervision gives us the opportunity to share it. We have become a

department of professional collaborators. Most teachers plan a little harder, a little more carefully, when they know they are going to be observed. The number of observations per teacher has increased by as much as ten times. One natural result of this is a healthy anxiety. We are on our toes for each other.

Time and money remained problems, though. We were still acting on our own, and not as part of the system. We decided that we needed to hire an aide to help create time by relieving teachers of nonacademic duties such as lunchroom and hall patrol. In this way, we were willing to exchange nonprofessional time for professional growth time. We prepared a grant application for a three year project. We asked for funds to pay an aide for three years, to purchase a computer and peripherals for record keeping, to finance any professional travel connected with the program, and to produce some sort of handbook or final documentation.

We sent out approximately 150 grant applications, and they were all rejected. This was, indeed, depressing. We were able to get project funds from the high school project budget. We were also able to find other special funds to purchase the computer equipment. Perhaps the most interesting donation came from the Vermont Yankee Nuclear Power Corporation. They run a training facility in Brattleboro, and they were interested in what we were doing. They wanted to apply our techniques with their own trainers. This was particularly intriguing: public education leading industry as opposed to the usual opposite situation. All of these sources did result in our obtaining an aide, and this has greatly facilitated the program this year.

Before the year was over, a colleague and I presented our program, such as it was, to an IPD conference for VT-NEA. This earned an invitation to present the program at the VT-NEA state conference in the fall, 1987. I had also attended the Conference for Secondary School English Department

Chairpersons at the National Council of Teachers of English Annual Convention in San Antonio in the fall of 1986. I made enough contacts there to secure a place on their 1987 program in Los Angeles. I also became a RAP (resource agent program) agent for Vermont for the 1987 - 88 school year.

As the year closed, we were feeling good about what we had done, but we realized that there was still much to be done. We were still flying by the seat of our pants. We had had no formal training. I was reading, but the program remained amorphous and in a way, 'unofficial.' We had to determine how to institutionalize what we were doing so that it would not be lost, yet we had to retain teacher control, a primary factor in its success and power. We wanted to spread the program to other parts of the school as well.

PART TWO: DEVELOPMENT DURING 1987-88 SCHOOL YEAR

As the 1987-8 school year began, and we entered the second year of the program, we remained unsure of our direction, although we were committed to the concept or peer supervision/assistance. We had the money to hire an aide, and this was done by committee. We posted a calendar in the English office, and department members could sign up to have the aide cover various non-instructional duties. This greatly facilitated the process.

Early in the year we began to use department meeting time to discuss the program. One of the first issues to deal with was, once again, the role of the department chair. We decided that he should be part of the group, but not the head of the group during the meetings. Consequently, I was elected as chair of this program. The main purpose for this was to have someone run the meeting, so that we could proceed in some orderly fashion. We continued to argue over and iron out details of what we were about. The result of these early meetings was a rationale statement. As you can see, many of the issues, such as voluntarism, methodology, and documentation, are touched upon here.

During this time, the department chair and I were meeting with the educational personnel from Vermont Yankee Nuclear Power Corporation. This evenutally lead to a $3,000 grant, which was certainly useful. At the same time, the need for training was becoming more apparent. Since I had read more than anyone else, I volunteered to be the first to present some information which might help people in their peer observation efforts.

I presented Acheson and Gall's outline for pre-observation techniques. From here the discussion moved into such issues as the number of observations we should be doing, if we should adopt a consistent approach to observation, other forms of peer assistance, and suggestions for future meeting topics with

regard to peer supervision. There was a general feeling that to superimpose a specific technique would go counter to the program's organic and free style approach. However, any presentation of techniques was seen as useful, because it added to the possible choices teachers had available to them. We came to a nonbinding agreement that one observation each month was a reasonable number to aim for. The suggestions for topics for future meetings resulted in my surveying the department and putting these topics in a priority list. The department chair suggested to me that we have more meetings devoted to the project, but I argued against this. From informal contact with department members, I learned of their desire to stop talking about peer supervision for a while, and simply do it. We suspended any further meetings on this topic for a while.

The department had an in-service day at its disposal on February 29, 1988. I began organizing this day by sending department members a memo which named the two topics which received the highest priority when I had surveyed people and then asked for volunteers to lead parts of the in-service program. Of course, nobody volunteered. The meeting we had on this program went around and around in circles, but we decided that we wanted a general sharing session, some presentations on observation techniques, a discussion of documentation, and a workshop on publications. This last was because we were going to hold the session at the VT Yankee Training Center, so we knew there would be sophisticated publications materials available.

Armed with this vague outline, I contacted the people at Yankee, buttonholed a few colleagues, and developed the the Peer Assistance In-Service day agenda included in this section. The atmosphere was comfortable, including seminar chairs and good audio-visual equipment. We never made it to the documentation section of the program, but we accomplished a great deal, and moved the whole project to a new level.

The open discussion lead to a series of new ideas about peer supervision. We decided that there was no longer a need to restrict ourselves to the three part observation. This remained the cornerstone of our program, but we developed other means of supporting each other. For instance, the aide could be used to release a teacher not to observe a colleague, but to talk to a colleague and exchange information and materials. We started a 'newsletter' through which a teacher could request materials from others in the department or advertise a special program which was about to happen in his or her classroom. For instance, one teacher, through this vehicle, requested materials on Homer's Odyssey. She had never taught it before. The next day she received five thick folders full of materials. We established a department experts list of people who were familiar with specific topics and who would be willing to present this material in other people's classes. One teacher might have previously researched background on the American 1920's as introductory material for teaching The Great Gatsby. This teacher, now on the experts list, would be available to present his lecture to someone else's class. I presented a two day lecture on Odyssey background information in a colleague's classroom. Another new idea was to use department meeting time to share expertise. For instance, instead of the usual department meeting, there could be three topics of general interest (i.e., sentence combining, Hamlet, and ninth grade speech activities). Each teacher would choose one of these topics and join that group for the hour after school. Within the group, teachers would exchange materials and ideas. This project has not yet happened. In other words, peer assistance, professional growth, can take many forms. Various department members volunteered to organize these programs.

The discussion of documentation was postponed to a later department meeting, although we did get into a somewhat heated debate over what constituted making value judgments and what constituted reporting objective

observations. We still have much to resolve. At this time, whether or not written records are kept after a peer observation remains the decision of the observed teacher. At the subsequent department meeting, we began to organize the final document we would produce at the end of this year to summarize our activities for the board of education and anyone else who supported our efforts. We decided that each teacher would write a one page summary of his or her peer supervision activities. We also would include a section on the history of the program, its development, and its future. We would amass relevant statistics concerning the number and nature of professional peer contacts, and what kinds of benefits accrued from these contacts.

One issue which has plagued us from the start is how to show others what we have accomplished. The nature of the project makes hard evidence difficult to obtain. The observations are, by necessity, confidential. We are not able to show an increase in SAT scores. How do you explain the advantages of a renewed spirit of collegiality and professionalism to a school board that wants a dollars and cents justification for a program? A colleague in the science department suggested that we invite board members into the school to see what we are doing. I took this suggestion to heart.

I had developed a strong professional relationship with another senior high teacher through the program. We had been in each other's classes several times, we respected each other, and we had progressed to the point where we could be completely honest with each other. I then invited two high school board members to view us going through the process, live and unrehearsed. With the help of the aide and department head to cover classes, this took place on March 15, 1988. The board members watched us have our pre-conference, they observed my class, and they observed our post-conference. Then they received copies of the report written by the observing teacher. Between segments of the cycle, we were able to answer many of the board

members' questions. We recorded the entire cycle, including the question and answer sessions, on videotape. This tape has been requested by the science department to help them start their own version of peer assistance.

With the help of my colleagues, I have been able to push back the limits of peer assistance on several fronts. I spent five consecutive second periods teaching a colleague how to use the word processor. Another teacher observed the first ten minutes of my tenth grade class for ten consecutive days in order to gather data for a self-study (action research) I was conducting on the techniques I used for teaching vocabulary. Perhaps the most exciting experience to grow out of this program for me, though, has been the joint teaching project I developed with a seventh grade teacher. This was the same colleague who had joined me in several of the presentations. We have been working together as peer supervisors steadily for two years now, and we have developed a strong and comfortable professional relationship.

We decided that we should teach the same novel, she to one of her seventh grade classes, and I to my senior elective in the novel. We chose Robert Cormier's I am the Cheese. This is not the place to discuss the project in detail, but allow me to outline what we did as an illustration of the potential for peer supervision. We had students keep a response journal. Each day in class, the seventh graders would write their thoughts, ideas, questions, reactions concerning their previous night's reading assignment. This is the typical reader response journal. However, we brought the journal to life. I would receive the journals later in the day, and my seniors wrote in them, responding to what the seventh graders had written. Then the books went back to the junior high. In this way, we set up a daily dialogue between the two classes. After a while, seventh and twelfth graders were asking each other questions, sharing ideas, helping each other over the rough spots. They were teaching each other in an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust that

rarely if ever develops between teachers and students. We discovered that what worked for us (peer assistance) worked for students as well. During the unit, my colleague and I each observed and taught each other's classes from time to time. Finally, we brought the two classes together to meet each other and watch the movie of the novel.

At this time, we are filling out grant applications for support for next year. Again, we have applied for high school project funds, as well as for funds from about five Vermont sources. I have intentionally withdrawn from this process, convincing several colleagues to put together this paper work. I must now begin to dissociate from the program, because I do not want it to become mine. In the fall, I will make very clear the fact that I am no longer chairman and do not want to be. Too often a program exists because of one person's efforts. The test will come in the fall, when we see if the department can carry on the project. After all, this is supposed to be owned by all of us, and if it cannot maintain itself, then in some measure we have failed.

PEER ASSISTANCE IN-SERVICE

BUHS ENGLISH DEPARTMENT
VT YANKEE TRAINING CENTER
FEBRUARY 29, 1988

8:00 - 8:30
TOUR OF THE VERMONT YANKEE TRAINING FACILITY
IRV MARSDEN--TRAINING SUPPORT SUPERVISOR
RAND SPINNEY--TRAINING MANAGER

8:30 - 9:00
WORKING BREAKFAST
PROVIDED BY TERI APPEL
DISCUSSION/QUESTIONS FROM TOUR

9:00 - 9:45
ROUND TABLE SHARING SESSION
CHAIRED BY RAY JENNESS

10:00 - 11:00
OBSERVATION TECHNIQUES
DAN HELLER
ZEKE HECKER
GORDON BRISTOL, VERMONT YANKEE PR COORDINATOR (USE OF VCR)

11:15 - 12:00
DISCUSSION OF DOCUMENTATION
CO-CHAIRED BY MARY ELLEN BIXBY AND JOYCE SULLIVAN

12:00 - 1:00
WORKING LUNCH
PROVIDED BY VERMONT YANKEE
WORKSHOP ON PUBLICATIONS BY
GORDON BRISTOL, VERMONT YANKEE PR COORDINATOR
JAN KOBESKI, VERMONT YANKEE MEDIA SPECIALIST

1:00 - 3:00
TIME FOR...
PRE/POST OBSERVATION CONFERENCES
PEER ASSISTANCE PLANNING
DOCUMENTATION
ATTENDANCE AT OTHER DISTRICT WORKSHOPS

PEER ASSISTANCE PROGRAM
BRATTLEBORO UNION JUNIOR/SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL
BRATTLEBORO, VERMONT

"We value a spirit of cooperation and mutual respect among students and adults because it enhances human dignity"
--from Brattleboro Union H. S.
Philosophy

"Opportunities should be provided for sharing of individual talents and strengths in order to enrich the total school community. In addition, the environment should allow for communication of ideas, recognition of needs and successes of individuals, and participation in decision making."
--from Brattleboro Union Jr. H. S.
Philosophy

GOALS:

To develop and document a voluntary program of peer support among English department staff members which demonstrates practices in keeping with the BUHS philosophy statement.

To allow English staff members to observe their colleagues at different grade levels, thus becoming familiar with and appreciative of the work done by the department as a whole.

To help each other to develop professionally and to improve our instructional techniques.

To provide positive feedback for each other.

To present and publish our findings for the perusal and review of our district colleagues, community members, and national professional associations.

To establish a broad-based system for professional growth which will augment the present contractual evaluation methods.

APPROACHES:

Participation in the program shall be voluntary.

Participants may choose any methods they wish.

Each participant will write a two page report describing his/her involvement for 1987-88, and submit it for review and/or publication by June 1, 1988.

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